

Experimenting with Peer Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Recent research indicates that peer-reflection activities are effective in helping language learners to develop a sense of ownership for their learning progress. This article reports on the author's efforts to develop activities and materials that would help students reflect with their peers on their performance in group discussions. Observations from a five week teaching journal will be used to exemplify the difficulties and benefits for students that arose from these peer-reflection activities, as well as what insights could be gained by the instructor from listening to the students' reflections.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, much research has been done which suggests that student self-assessment and peer-reflection are much more effective than teacher-fronted feedback in developing a sense of ownership, self-efficacy and personal responsibility (Birjandi & Masood 2010, Kohonen 2000, Min 2006). This is mirrored in the large amount of research done by Rikkyo EDC instructors indicating that self-assessment checklists are effective in helping students to reflect on their performance and improve the frequency of their function use (Davies 2012, Brinham, 2013).

Having used these checklists in classes myself, I have observed that they are useful for helping students to target which functions they were not using so much. However, a major issue with checklists is that students only reflect on the frequency of their function use and not on how and why the functions can be useful for having better discussions. In addition, as students only discussed frequency of function use, I often had trouble ascertaining exactly why some students might be having problems using certain functions which made it difficult for me to provide useful feedback to help them deal with their problems.

Therefore, the aims of this journal were to; a) develop materials that would help the students collaborate with their peers and effectively reflect on how and why the functions can be used to have better discussions; b) observe the benefits and difficulties for the students of peer-reflection; and c) discover what insights I could gain from listening to the students' reflections.

As this journal focuses on developing materials rather than addressing a specific problem in the classroom, any class could have been observed. It was decided that observing my Wednesday classes would provide the most useful insights as they consisted of two average Level 3 classes and were later in the week when my lesson plan was more refined. As there were no significant differences between the two groups, observations from both classes will be presented interchangeably and no specific reference as to which class the observations came from will be made in the discussion.

DISCUSSION

Before starting the journal, I developed a general procedure for conducting peer reflection activities. Students reflected with their peers in pairs or in groups of three directly after finishing D1 and D2. Both activities were identical so that the students could more easily reflect after each discussion. In order to avoid influencing the students' reflections, it was decided that the students would reflect with each other before teacher-fronted feedback was given. In addition, when teacher-fronted feedback was given, it should, as much as possible, only comment upon the students reflections and not introduce new ideas so as not to override the students' ideas.

For the first observation in lesson 6, the reflection materials consisted of two questions (See appendix 1.1). The first question had students remember examples of paraphrasing that their partners had used in the discussion. The second question focused on having the students reflect on whether paraphrasing was useful in their discussion.

In this lesson, the students experienced some difficulties. Many couldn't remember examples for the first question, and students who did not use the function in their discussion had no examples to discuss. As a result, it was also difficult for some to discuss the second question. For students who could remember examples, there seemed to be some embarrassment when talking about their own performance and despite having some good instances of extended negotiations in their discussions they tended to pick the simpler examples of paraphrasing. Therefore, I had to teacher-front feedback more than wanted in this class. These problems are consistent with literature which suggests that learners often have difficulties with reflection activities when they are not used to reflecting on their performance, especially with their peers (Kohonen 2000), and that more scaffolding and training is required at the initial stages to help the students make a smoother transition (Min 2006).

Based on these observations in the previous class, I made a number of alterations to the reflection materials for lesson 7 (See appendix 1.2). Asking the students to remember examples outright seemed to overwhelm them so I changed the initial question to have the students remember the topics they talked about in their discussion first. The purpose of this question was to activate their memories of the discussion so that they could more easily remember examples for their reflection. I also simplified the questions so that the students could reflect more easily and I changed the questions to focus on the use of functions by the group as a whole, rather than each individual's function use. This way, even students who hadn't used the function could participate in the reflection. Finally, I added some extra scaffolding by providing example answers to each question which the students could use to frame their own reflections.

In this class, it seemed that the group-focus and the first question to activate their memories were successful as most students could remember multiple examples of reporting information from their discussions. However, the example answers didn't seem to help them form their ideas and I had to give extensive help with the second question. For example, some students would say, "I think ---'s idea was interesting. She said ----." However, when I asked them "why?", they couldn't say. It also seemed that some students were just picking examples at random. However, after I modeled the example of one student's idea that I thought was interesting and why I thought so, they seemed able to think of good reasons of why reporting was useful for their discussion, for example "This example [of reporting information] was interesting because I didn't know this fact". This observation further supports the importance that providing scaffolding to the students in the initial stages of introducing a new activity (Min 2006).

I could also use their reflections to reinforce my teacher fronted feedback. For example, after D1 one group said it was difficult for them to think of information because they didn't know about sports stars. This was a problem because they chose the first topic in the textbook rather than a topic that they could talk about. Therefore, I could suggest that they use the changing topic phrases to choose an interesting topic first. As a result, in D2 everyone could give at least two instances of reporting and could also think of examples much better in the second reflection, which I feel cemented the importance of the function for them.

For lesson 8, as a review lesson, I decided to go back to using a checklist to focus on general use of functions and communication skills. However, in the reflections some students commented that they couldn't understand the timing of using the new functions. Therefore, I decided to make a flow-chart diagram with a rough order of functions so they could understand

the timings better. Also, after seeing a presentation about the motivational power of can-do statements (Yoshida 2013), I incorporated can-do questions in the reflection activities to guide their reflections and motivate the students to use the functions more in the discussions. The can-do questions included “How many topics can you find for this question?”, “Can you make an “If....?” Question for this topic?”, “Can you think of any information about this topic?”

In this class, the group seemed to be getting more comfortable with reflecting with each other. They could remember examples from their discussions more easily and the emphasis on group performance rather than individual performance seemed to create a more collaborative reflection session which gave me a lot of opportunity to provide focused teacher feedback. In one interesting example, a student mentioned that “paraphrasing is a difficult function to use because you have to understand the other person’s idea clearly”. I put this to the class and they all agreed. This gave me the opportunity to make the point that purpose of paraphrasing is to help clarify ideas so paraphrasing is even more important when you don’t understand clearly. Another example was that after D1, many students still mentioned having trouble knowing when to use the functions and this allowed me to refer to the flowchart and show that asking the questions will help their group to use the functions more.

The can-do questions also seemed to be effective. When going through the diagram, many said that all functions were a challenge and when I asked if they could you use all of the functions, every student said “no”. This gave me the opportunity to say “Not no, you just can’t use yet”. This was a good motivational moment. I also noticed that after the D1 reflection, the students seemed to make a real effort to use the functions in D2. Some comments in the discussion, such as “that was an interesting question!” and “have we used an “If” question yet?” especially seemed to exemplify that the students were thinking about the functions during the discussion.

In lesson 9, I used the same activity as lesson 8, and this time, the students could get into the reflective discussions smoothly and quickly. Before, it always took time for them to start reflecting and there was a lot of redundant conversation, but this time they were ready and started instantly which supports research that introducing new methods requires time and training (Kohonen 2000, Min 2006).

Some comments were now also showing a deep level of reflection, for example, “How can we use this [the reporting] phrase?”, “Maybe, I saw on the smartphone that_____ “. However, the reflections had a tendency to become a bit negative, for example, “English is hard” and “I can’t use many phrases”. I felt that this could be demotivating and this supports the contention that a lot of thought has to go into the way that peer reflection activities are structured by the instructor so that students can have a positive learning experience (Birjandi & Masood 2010).

For lesson 10, I went back to the function-focused style of reflection activity for the new function of “Different viewpoints” (See appendix 1.3). Some small changes were made based on the observations in lesson 7. A question specifically requiring the students to remember examples of function use in their group was added and the example answers were changed to a gap-fill style to provide a more usable model for the students to structure their reflections.

The students could now get straight into their reflections with minimal problems and there was increased evidence of ideas that showed deep reflection. These comments gave me some interesting insights into some of the issues that the students were facing which I otherwise might not have realized. One interesting reflection was related to a point I mentioned in the previous class’ written comments for the discussion test. I mentioned that one reason why some people got low scores for content was that some students took very long turns. As a result, the student said that one of the bad points of “Different Viewpoints” was that it takes too long to

talk about the topics. This showed that the student was relating his reflection to the comments I had written. It also enlightened me to an idea that I had never considered before and helped me to give the feedback that talking about the topic for a long time is ok but that there should be more turn taking so that everyone has a chance to participate. Another student said that they couldn't discuss the topics deeply because there were so many topics that they could only address them in a shallow way. Again, I didn't expect this and this allowed me to emphasize that they don't have to discuss all topics in the textbook and it better discuss a few ideas deeply than many ideas shallowly. Finally, one student mentioned that "Different Viewpoints" works well with "If". This showed me that the students were thinking of connections between the functions. All of this has taught me that peer reflection can also be a good resource to me as a teacher as it effectively gives me a window into my students' minds.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction, three aims for this teaching journal were outlined. As for developing effective materials, I learned that careful consideration is necessary when implementing peer-reflection activities. As the literature suggests, I found that it takes time for students to get used to new activities (Kohonen 2000), and that focused training and scaffolding, such as memory activation questions, model answers and can-do questions, are useful for helping students to build the skills to effectively reflect with their peers (Birjandi & Masood 2010, Min 2006).

This is mirrored in the fact that the students initially had difficulties with the peer reflection activities. However, once the students had become used to the activities, several benefits started to become apparent. By reflecting with their peers, the students seemed to be able to gain a deeper understanding of the functions and how they can be integrated to make deep and fluent discussion, as well as a greater sense of ownership over their learning progress.

Finally, from a teacher perspective, by listening to the students' reflections I was able to gain insights into the students thinking that I might not have been aware of otherwise. This helped me to provide focused teacher-fronted feedback to the students' individual needs. In this way, I could reinforce their ideas and further encourage a sense of ownership among the students.

To conclude, this teacher journal has been an interesting learning experience and has convinced me that peer-reflection activities can be very useful in EDC classes. However, it should be noted that as I was developing the teaching methodology and materials for the peer-reflection activities throughout the course, the students were always being confronted with new materials in every class. In the future, I look forward building on these peer-reflection activities with a more consistent approach from the start of the course.

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APPENDIX

Development of peer-reflection materials

1.1) Lesson 6 – Paraphrasing – basic design

1. Can you remember an example that your partner paraphrased?
2. What do you think about these ideas? If **Yes**, For example? If **No**, Why?
 - a. Paraphrasing helped to understand my partners' idea clearly. **(Yes/No)**
 - b. Paraphrasing helped to talk about the topics more deeply. **(Yes/No)**

1.2) Lesson 7 – Reporting information – Simpler questions / Topic question added / Examples added / Group focus

1. **What topics did your group talk about in your discussion?**
(EX. We talked about important qualities for sports stars)
2. **Do you think reporting made your discussion more interesting? Yes - For example? / No -Why?**
EX) Yes, I think so. For example, Ryo said he read in a magazine that Johnny Depp was paid 300 million dollars for Pirates of the Caribbean. I think this was very interesting because that is a lot of money! I was surprised?

1.3) Lesson 10 – Different viewpoints – Examples changed to a gap-fill style / Question focusing on function use added

1. **What topics did your group talk about in your discussion?**
(EX. We talked about _____.)
2. **What viewpoints did your group talk about in your discussion?**
(EX. We talked about using phones on the train from _____ and _____ viewpoints.)
3. **Do you think talking about different viewpoints helped your group to talk more deeply about the topics?**